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A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

BIBLICAL NAMING
AND POETIC ETYMOLOGY

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By a conservative count the narrative books of the Hebrew Bible contain over eighty explicit etymologies—passages in which, with some exceptions, proper nouns designating persons and places are given a semantic interpretation based on phonetic correspondences.[1] Unlike covert plays on names, explicit glosses tend to be formulaic, although the forms are often mixed or freely varied. Typically the naming of a child will be recorded in the narrative past tense, "and she called his name Seth" (שֵׁת), followed by a subordinate clause which echoes some feature of the name, "for she said, 'God has appointed (שָׁת) for me another child instead of Abel'" (Gen 4:25). The naming of a place is more often preceded by an account of something that happened there, from which an inference is then drawn to its meaning: Lot pleaded with the angel to let him flee to yonder city, so "little" or "insignificant" (מִצְעָר); "therefore the name of the city was called Zoar" (צוֹעַר) (Gen 19:22).

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[1] More or less comprehensive surveys include the following: Johannes Fichtner, "Die etymologische Aetiologie in den Namengebungen der geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments," *VT* 6 (1956) 372–96 (also the first to attempt a formal typology); Burke O. Long, *The Problem of Etiological Narrative in the Old Testament* (BZAW 108; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1968); Andrzej Strus, *Nomen-omen: La Stylistique sonore des noms propres dans le Pentateuque* (AnBib 80; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), esp. pp. 77–89, 191–93; Allen Paul Ross, "Paronomasia and Popular Etymology in the Naming Narratives of the Old Testament" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1981); Russell T. Cherry, "Paronomasia and Proper Names in the Old Testament: Rhetorical Function and Literary Effect" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988); and, most recently and fully, Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (1986; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1991). Garsiel's signal virtue is his copious identification of "implicit name derivations," in which the gloss remains tacit (see too his "Puns upon Names as a Literary Device in 1 Kings 1–2," *Bib* 72 [1991] 379–86; and "Homiletic Name-Derivations as a Literary Device in the Gideon Narrative: Judges VI–VIII," *VT* 43 [1993] 302–17). The most useful bibliography is in Strus, the fullest in Ross, which must be complemented for scholarship in Hebrew by Garsiel. In all, the rather artificial problem of classification would seem to be a principal focus.

On first reading the majority of these passages, one is at a loss what to make of them: like Zoar to Lot, they seem rather insignificant. Their frequency and prominent position, often as concluding verses, appear to be at odds with their marginal contribution to the narratives. Although a few provide thematic emphasis, the majority seem anticlimactic, if not wholly peripheral. How are we to respond to such superfluity? For the medieval allegorists and their precursors, the apparent triviality of the glosses offered an occasion for philological ingenuity and narrative expansion. By contrast, modern scholars, bound by different canons of interpretative fidelity, have usually dismissed them as incidental embellishments or isolated them as curious residua of a primitive folk tradition.

This latter was the approach initiated by Hermann Gunkel, who, under the influence of contemporary folklore theory, argued that the etymologies were especially clear examples of the etiological legend, responses to so-called *Kinderfragen,* which arose from simple curiosity about natural and cultural phenomena. They were thus assumed to represent the most primitive stratum of oral tradition.[2] Following Gunkel, the pioneers of *Überlieferungsgeschichte* fixed on the etiological motive as a constitutive factor in the evolution of biblical stories. In many cases, they argued, speculation about the meaning of familiar names had given rise to explanatory legends which only appeared to be historical. Prompted by a pious impulse to "save the phenomena," American scholars attempted to dismantle this etiological argument, first on theoretical grounds and later through a painstaking analysis of individual episodes aimed at demonstrating the secondary nature of the purportedly originative formulae. The result was to relegate the glosses once more to peripheral status, mnemonic or didactic aids at best, as W. F. Albright had called them.[3] In time the question of significance was abandoned altogether in hair-splitting debates over the correct definition of the traditionary form or *Gattung* in question, while the peculiarly veiled potency of etymological naming continued to go unnoticed, in large part

[2] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (1901; HKAT; 5th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922) xxi–xxii. The approach was developed by Albrecht Alt ("Josua," in *Werden und Wesen des Alten Testaments* [ed. P. Volz et al.; BZAW 66; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1936] 13–29) and by Martin Noth (*Das Buch Josua* [1938; HAT 7; 2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953]; and *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* [1948; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972]).

[3] W. F. Albright, "The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archaeology," *BASOR* 74.4 (1939) 11–23. Albright characterizes the attitude of the German form critics toward history as "nihilistic"; cf. John Bright, *Early Israel in Recent History Writing* (SBT 19; London: SCM Press, 1956) 91–100. The work of Brevard S. Childs ("A Study of the Formula 'Until This Day,'" *JBL* 82 [1963] 279–92; "The Birth of Moses," *JBL* 84 [1965] 109–22; "The Etiological Tale Reexamined," *VT* 24 [1974] 387–97) and of Long continues the attack on Noth et al., emphasizing the "secondary" character of the etiological traditions. Summaries of the debate from the German side may be found in Claus Westermann, *Forschung am Alten Testament* (Munich: Kaiser, 1964) 43–47; and Friedemann Golka, "Zur Erforschung der Aetiologien im Alten Testament," *VT* 20 (1970) 90–98.

because scholars failed to appreciate the literary pressures that influenced the sophisticated selection—and invention—of etiological traditions.[4]

Arguably the most serious obstacle to such an appreciation has been the belief—now condescending, now celebratory—that biblical naming intends a direct rapport with the essential being of the object named. This is an assumption that cuts across both sides of the Gunkel–Albright debate, the common premise being that the biblical etymologies are direct adoptions from primitive tradition. Reports on the magical virtue of names were a staple of the classic anthropological literature, and the same orientation was perhaps to be expected among older critics attracted by the comparatist's appeal to universals of human behavior. But even scholars at home with the skeptical stances of modern literary theory or sympathetic to the slippery continuities between "open" reading and polyvalent midrash have tended to adopt the primitivist approach to the name traditions. From Immanuel Casanowicz's conflation of paronomasia with "speaking names" a century ago to the latest dictionary article by Edward Greenstein, where names "betoken a fate" or "signify certain essential characteristics of their bearers," discussion of the etiological glosses has posited or implied a naïve form of linguistic realism—a humbler version of the correspondence theories assumed by the precritical allegorists.[5] "In such 'plays on words,'" writes von Rad in a representative comment, "the word has a different and much more primitive way of acting: on solemn occasions it can release meanings and establish mental affinities which lie at the deeper level of its magical matrix."[6] Magical and essentialist views of biblical naming are equally

[4]There are of course exceptions, especially among scholars influenced by the rabbinic sensitivity to repetition and verbal nuance. Foremost among them are Benno Jacob (*Das Erste Buch der Tora: Genesis* [Berlin: Schocken, 1934]) and, more dogmatically, Umberto Cassuto in his commentaries on Genesis and Exodus (1944; 1949; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961, 1964; 1951; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967). Among Israeli scholars writing in Western languages prior to Garsiel, I. L. Seeligmann ("Voraussetzungen der Midraschexegese," in *Congress Volume: Copenhagen 1953* [VTSup 1; Leiden: Brill, 1953] 150–81) and Yair Zakovitch ("Explicit and Implicit Name-Derivations," *HAR* 4 [1980] 167–81; and "A Study of Precise and Partial Derivations in Biblical Etymology," *JSOT* 15 [1980] 31–50) have focused attention on the name traditions (see also Stanley Gevirtz, "Of Patriarchs and Puns: Joseph at the Fountain, Jacob at the Ford," *HUCA* 46 [1975] 33–54; and Frank Zimmermann, "Folk Etymology of Biblical Names," in *Volume du Congrès: Genève, 1965* [VTSup 15; Leiden: Brill, 1986] 311–26). Perhaps the most impressive interpretative effort to date is Joel Rosenberg's discussion of the naming of Adam and Eve ("The Garden Story Forward and Backward," *Prooftexts* 1 [1981] 1–27 [reprinted in *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 47–68]). Leslie Brisman treats several of the double glosses as sites of literary revisionism (*The Voice of Jacob: On the Composition of Genesis* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990]).

[5]Immanuel M. Casanowicz, *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* (Boston: Norwood, 1894) 36. Edward L. Greenstein, "Wordplay, Hebrew," *ABD* 6. 970.

[6]Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (1960; 2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1965) 2. 83–84. Cf. J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (I–II; London: Oxford University Press, 1926) 245; Hans Bietenhard, "*onoma* . . . ," *TDNT* 5. 25; R. Abba, "Name," *IDB* 3. 503; A. F. Key, "The Giving of Proper Names in the Old Testament," *JBL* 83 (1964) 55–59; J. Heller, "Namen-

prevalent among literary critics, who tend to revert to theological rather than ethnological stereotypes for support, often linking the Bible to Plato's *Cratylus* in a topos that dates from the Renaissance.

   As I hope to show in what follows, neither the speculative pretensions of Cratylism nor the magical entailments of preliterate or priestly divination adequately represent the motives of the biblical authors, who seem rather to exploit the myth of true meaning as a generic convention, subject to the most aggressive revision. For all its etiological thrust, biblical etymology avoids the mythologizing pursuit of an extrachronological root that would correspond to the essential character of the being named. The typical gloss marks a makeshift beginning as opposed to an absolute origin. It is arbitrary rather than inevitable, willful rather than essential, enabling, but only by virtue of the limits it imposes. Perhaps the convention of *sprechende Namen* (despite such superficially related examples as Adam in the primeval history; and Naomi, Mahlon, and Chilion in the late novella of Ruth) was too closely associated with the religious literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Babylonian Creation Epic, to take the most important negative paradigm, is a veritable compound of essentialistic etymologies—most notably in the celebration of the fifty names of Marduk, where the very attributes of the god are generated as glosses on the archaic Sumerian names. By contrast, the story of the tower of Babel, with its multiple allusions to the text of the Creation Epic, turns on the difference between the elevation and the translation of a proper name and culminates in an ironical etymologization of Babel itself.[7] Rather than speculate on the elective antinomies between Hebrew and Babylonian poetics, however, I want to focus here on several familiar instances of what for me is the exemplary type of the biblical stance: the name tradition in which an initial or explicit gloss is ironically doubled.

gebung und Namendeutung: Grundzüge der alttestamentlichen Onomatologie und ihre Folgen für die biblische Hermeneutik," *EvT* 27 (1967) 255–66; and Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 258. One exception to the consensus is Meir Sternberg, who sees in biblical names not a numinous symbol but "a parallel to the epithetic redundancies of realism. . . . A person's name may be the essence of his being, but that essence is more ensured, if not veiled, than expressed by the name" (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985] 330–31). For the anthropological background on "primitive" naming (indebted indirectly to the writings of Max Müller and ultimately to the "expressive" theories of German Romanticism), see the syntheses in James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1922) chap. 22; Ernst Cassirer, *Sprache und Mythos: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Götternamen* (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg 6; Leipzig: Teubner, 1925) chap. 4; Lucien Lévy Bruhl, *L'Ame primitive* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1927) chaps. 7 and 12; and Otto Jespersen, *Mankind, Nation and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1946) chap. 9.

   [7] See E. A. Speiser, "Word Plays on the Creation Epic's Version of the Founding of Babylon," *Or.* 25 (1956) 317–23. For the name glosses in Tablets VI and VII, see Franz M. T. Böhl, "Die fünfzig Namen des Marduk," *ArOr* 11 (1936–37) 191–218, and especially J. Bottéro, "Les Noms de Marduk, l'écriture et la 'logique' en Mésopotamie ancienne," in *Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of J.J. Finkelstein* (ed. Maria de Jong Ellis; Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences 19; Hamden, CT: Archon, 1977) 5–28.

Etiological formulas commonly come at the end of biblical narratives. In the Noah story the interpretation of the name comes at the beginning, interpolated as a transitional element toward the close of the long genealogical passage that precedes the accounts of the flood:[8]

וַיְחִי־לֶמֶךְ שְׁתַּיִם וּשְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה וּמְאַת שָׁנָה וַיּוֹלֶד בֵּן: וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ נֹחַ
לֵאמֹר זֶה יְנַחֲמֵנוּ מִמַּעֲשֵׂנוּ וּמֵעִצְּבוֹן יָדֵינוּ מִן־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אֵרְרָהּ יְהֹוָה:

When Lamech had lived a hundred and eighty-two years, he begot a son, and he called his name Noah, saying, "this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands from the ground which YHWH has cursed." (Gen 5:28–29)

Akkadian ghosts may be hovering near the surface: for instance, the etymology may play indirectly on Naḥmūlel, an alternate name of Gilgamesh; or the coupling of "work" and "toil" may echo a similar doublet in the Atrahasis Epic, where the creation of man is ordained as relief for the gods. In context, however, the verse seems already to have a double reference: forward to the institution of viticulture which follows the flood and backward to the cursing of Adam: אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בַּעֲבוּרֶךָ בְּעִצָּבוֹן תֹּאכֲלֶנָּה ("cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it," Gen 3:17). Adding up the ages of the patriarchs in chap. 5 (MT), we note too that Noah is the first person born after the death of Adam. Perhaps then Lamech is interpreting the divine sentence as applicable to Adam personally rather than to humanity, and affirming by the reversal in word order ("cursed . . . ground . . . toil" / "toil . . . ground . . . cursed") that he expects to see it lifted. The stylistically obtrusive echo of Adam's own name etiology in the middle of the gloss alerts us to Noah's role as the second Adam (מִן־הָאֲדָמָה, 2:7)—an association resumed in the concluding vineyard episode, where Noah is again introduced as the first "man of the soil" (אִישׁ הָאֲדָמָה, 9:20).

Considered in themselves, Lamech's words give a "wrong" or divergent gloss to the name. The verb נחם ("to console" or "bring relief") evokes the name Menahem, not Noah, for which one rather requires a form of the verb נוח ("to rest")—the reading found in the Septuagint. The midrashim offer numerous explanations for the discrepancy, including the ingenious proposal that Methuselah actually named his grandson Noah, because through him the earth was appeased, but that Lamech, the father, named the boy Menahem, "consoler," as stated in the biblical gloss.[9] The components of Noah's name do fig-

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[8]On Noah's name one can now consult two fine discussions that were not yet written when this paper was originally presented: David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 128–30; and Brisman, *Voice of Jacob*, 18. See also Cassuto, *Genesis*, 1. 288–89; Strus, *Nomen-omen*, 158–62; and Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 203–4.

[9]*Yashar Bereshit* 13b; cf. *Gen. Rab.* 25.2. Rashi divides the verb into two parts and repoints it יָנַח מִמֶּנּוּ ("he will give us rest from [the toil of] our [hands]") thereby recovering the "Noah" root.

ure, however, in the text of the flood story. Like the reversal of word order in
Lamech's gloss, the striking turn that ends the four-verse prologue to the narra-
tive dramatizes the double mystery of election and merit by converting the
aberrant or illegitimately derived name into an iconic palindrome: "But Noah
(נח) found grace (חן) in the eyes of YHWH" (6:8).[10] More simply, the withheld
meaning "rest" returns with the gradual recession or "return" of the flood
waters (שׁוב, 8:3, perhaps in cryptic allusion to a parenetic motif; cf. Isa 30:15),
when the ark "comes to rest" on the mountains (וַתָּנַח, 8:4), and the dove
"returns" having found no "rest-place" (מָנוֹחַ) for her foot (8:9; cf. 8:7, 12).
Finally, the "soothing aroma" of the sacrifice (רֵיחַ הַנִּיחֹחַ, 8:21), which marks the
end of the flood amid language richly reminiscent of the prologue, reconfigures
Noah's name no less than the "spirit of life" (רוּחַ חַיִּים, 6:17; 7:15; 7:22) trans-
muted by the offering itself—thereby rendering back the animating "breath"
(נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים, conflated with the רוּחַ in 7:22) by which YHWH transformed his
first Adam into a "living being" (2:7).

Relation to the narrative prologue is particularly significant, since its four
verses appear to be a free composition, specially designed as introduction and
gnomic commentary to the traditional story that follows. It begins with YHWH
observing his unruly creation: "YHWH saw that the wickedness of man was
great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart
(וְכָל־יֵצֶר מַחְשְׁבֹת לִבּוֹ) was only evil continually" (6:5). The apparent redun-
dancy of the second clause defines the evil inclination, the יצר הרע of Jewish
tradition, as a form of solipsism, like the Augustinian image of the soul *recurva-
tus in se*. YHWH's response, which echoes the wording of the accusation, is an
equivalent inversion. The author of life turns against the life he engenders, and
the turning itself is troped as pain: וַיִּנָּחֶם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב
אֶל־לִבּוֹ ("And YHWH was sorry that he had made man on earth and it grieved
him in his heart," 6:6). Whereas Mesopotamian epic renders the tension
between justice and mercy as a conflict between independent gods, Enlil and
Ea, and Ugaritic poetry, followed by many of the psalms, personifies the threat
of extinction as the mythic "Mot" ("Death"), in the Noah story the cosmic
dimension is elided and we are given, instead of some harrowing vision of a pri-
mal anarch, only a deeper reminder of human weakness—not the serpent swal-
lowing the sun but an old man with his face in his cloak. Ultimately, this
fallibility will be dissociated from YHWH and incorporated into the definition
of human nature, allusively reconceived in the wake of the flood: "And YHWH
said in his *heart*, 'I will never again curse the *ground* because of *man* for the
imagination (יֵצֶר) of man's *heart* is evil from his youth'" (8:21). If the רֵיחַ הַנִּיחֹחַ
of Noah's sacrifice is compensation for the רוּחַ חַיִּים, YHWH's rejoinder not
only amends the curse in the garden but renews or reverses (through word
order again) the original "formation" (יצר) of "man" from the "ground" (2:7). As

[10] Cf. the formally analogous play in Gen 38:7: "But Er [ער] . . . was wicked [רע] in the eyes of
YHWH."

in the prologue (לִבּוֹ . . . לְבּוֹ), man's "heart" and YHWH's here correspond, but with the earlier misordering now temporarily repaired: man's heart, formally at least, follows after YHWH's.

Such subtle correspondences help relocate the gap in our understanding of Noah's name; for the verb that conveys YHWH's grief in the prologue, וַיִּנָּחֶם, has the same stem נחם that figured in the curious etymological motivation preceding the narrative (5:29). There it occurred in the piel, with the meaning "comfort," "console"; here in the niphal, meaning "be sorry," "repent."[11] Moreover, not only נחם, but the two following verbs, עשׂה ("make") and עצב ("grieve," "vex") point us back to Lamech's etymological gloss, where derivatives of the three stems have already appeared: "bring relief [or comfort] . . . work [literally makings] . . . and toil [or vexation]." On the one hand, then, Noah's name is "rest," and his salvation is warrant for the fulfillment of the inaugural promise that YHWH will make to Abraham in chap. 12. On the other, it is "consolation," "comfort," but of an order that encompasses YHWH's own desolation, or that must first pass by way of that desolation in order to learn its meaning. In the process, it seems that Noah even becomes YHWH's own comfort—but whether as companion (the sentimental reading) or as spectacle (the cynical alternative) depends on how we imagine YHWH inhabiting his paradoxical grief.[12]

Part of what compels the rereading of biblical narrative is that, as in the history it relates, "rest" and "comfort" are always prospective categories. At the

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[11] The same form occurs frequently in the prophets, but usually under the aspect of promise—YHWH promising to repent of a vow to punish if Israel too will repent. The closest parallel to the use of נחם in the flood story is YHWH's regret that he has made Saul king (1 Sam 15:11, 29), where it is, however, a vehicle for exposing the inconstancy of Samuel rather than of YHWH.

[12] Biblical exegesis seems to have ignored both options, but they appear powerfully in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which points directly to the troubled relations of "comfort" and "grace" in the final exchange between Edgar and Gloucester: "*Edgar*: I'll bring you comfort. *Gloucester*: Grace go with you, sir" (V.ii.4). The first reading suggests that what Noah offers God through his loyalty is the enlargement of mutual recognition, the opportunity to reflect "face to face" an ultimately human range of emotions. This is the view Shakespeare represents through Lear himself, who proposes to the incense-throwing gods no less than to Cordelia his "sacrifice" of mutual forgiveness (V.ii.10–11, 20–21). But supposing a God less intimate with his creation and more stoical with himself, the comfort Noah brings could rather be the distraction of spectacle, of recreation in the sense of pastime or sport. This is the view represented by Lear's double, Gloucester, who, having survived for a time the same flood as his master—having been, like him, "exposed" and "recovered" by his several children— dismisses his ordeal as a divine amusement: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport" (IV.i.36–37). The whole play, marked by a deluge which threatens to destroy the very seeds of life (themselves conceived as doubles or "germains," III.ii.8), is in many ways a Jobean rewriting of the flood story, in which the righteous are swept away with the guilty and the covenantal rainbow is replaced by the fiery wheel. Note that the two views of "consolation" correspond to an ambiguity in the meaning of biblical נחם, which can imply both the compassion of forgiveness (e.g., Deut 32:36; Exod 32:14) and, conversely, the satisfaction of vengeance, as when Esau "comforts himself" with the anticipated murder of Jacob (Gen 27:42), or YHWH with the threatened destruction of his Israelite adversaries (Isa 1:24). (The whole idea of Noah as YHWH's comfort again recalls the Atrahasis Epic, where the gods rely openly on their human servants.)

simplest level Noah's name looks forward to his planting of the vineyard: wine is to be for future generations an easing of the curse of labor. The sequel to the flood invites a darker view, however; for this ease immediately leads, by way of drunkenness, to a transgression only slightly less serious than the miscegenation of the angels and the daughters of men reported at the beginning of Genesis 6. The pattern here, consolation occasioning renewed transgression, is one of the dominant paradigms of Israelite historiography. But the small point I want to pause over, somewhat tentatively, is that the agent of this transgression is Noah's middle son Ham (חָם)—letters lurking as it were in the center of the verb נחם, "console/regret." Side by side with the paronomastic echoes of Noah that we noticed in the Hebrew words for "grace" and "soothing," specters of Ham's name also keep cropping up, the two most prominent being חָמָס ("violence," 6:11, 13), the key word that inaugurates the flood story proper immediately following the notice of Ham's birth (6:10), and מָחָה ("blot out," 6:7; 7:4, 23), which reflects the divine response with a kind of fearful symmetry. One could even cast the entire flood story as a battle between the two letters *nun* and *mem* (נח and חם), or, more dramatically, as the incursion of the "heat" (חֹם) of Ham into the "rest" of Noah. If חֵן is the specular obverse of Noah, חָם is its spectral double.

Students of poetics have long been intrigued with the notion, most searchingly explored by Saussure in his notebooks, that hypograms, frequently proper names, have a generative role in the formation of literary texts.[13] In the case of the literary adaptation of received traditions in biblical narrative, the process could be said to work backwards. The text is given first; the author then articulates a network of nominal echoes, or, as we shall see in the bulrushes story, plants a unifying cryptonym, so as to bring about a shift in the inherited matrix. Poetic etymology thus becomes a technique for troping the received tradition, for rescuing the text from prescriptive or reductive interpretation, without deforming it. Within the oral tradition which may have provided the material for the glosses, etymology could have intended a static realism, if not a magical science. The drive to erect stable frames of signification was equally characteristic of the traditional cultus, however, and there may be a strong anticultic impulse behind the etymological sophistry of the narratives. The same tension persists within highly evolved literary traditions, remote from the oral, where it may be directed against the pressures of genre or used to attack static canons of art. If literature, as some have argued, is an "order of *works*" as opposed to a particular kind of discourse,[14] then the "order of *words*" such a definition displaces—including the phantom order of past or ideal meaning—is literature's way of combatting its own institution.

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[13] For selections from the notebooks, see Jean Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

[14] See especially Alastair Fowler's attack on Northrop Frye in *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) 4–5 and passim.

In view of such effects we ought to recall that the flood story is immediately preceded by a play on the word "name" itself. However we understand the mythical Nephilim or "fallen ones" in Gen 6:1–4, the concluding phrase "men of renown" (אַנְשֵׁי הַשֵּׁם, 6:4, literally, "the men of name") places the whole idea of *nomen-omen* under critical scrutiny. Perhaps the unspecified "evil" that causes YHWH to condemn his creation (6:5) may be referred back to this epithet no less than to the effects of cosmic miscegenation. "To make oneself a name" will recur as the topos of illicit presumption for the would-be "mighty men" who build the tower of Babel (11:4)—a kind of metacritical parable (likewise framed by the key word שֵׁם, 10:31; 11:10), in which the discord that has spread through the primeval history from individual to family to human society finally erupts within language itself, the medium on which our very reception of that history must depend. The flood story, like Babel, relies closely on Mesopotamian models which it deliberately challenges, and its wordplay likewise extends the underlying polemic, focusing it on the idols of nominal essentialism and their theological correlatives. For in the end it is apparent that the naming of Noah presents us not with a justification but with a choice. Is the second Adam comfort or repentance, blessing or curse, Noah or Ham? Biblical narrative·is most often read as a form of prose epic; but such questions, which neglect the larger centrifugal movement to which each story contributes, seem closer to the temporal abruptions of prophecy. The naming of Noah invites both readings: on the one hand, the incessant alternation and projection through history of antithetical moments of consolation and transgression, each of which remains intact; on the other, the static confrontation at every moment of irreconcilable fates.

If etymological play was as sophisticated as I am arguing, it may not be coincidental that there is a last oscillation between נחם ("repent/comfort") and נוח ("rest") in the account of Moses' intercession before the renewal of the covenant in Exod 32:7–14. The exchange takes place on Sinai, when YHWH, provoked by the golden calf, decides to cancel the covenant he has just drawn up and to destroy the apostate Israelites. His injunction to Moses to leave him to his wrath—literally, "let me rest" (הַנִּיחָה לִּי, 32:10)—reaffirms the root נוח, as his ultimate decision to "repent" of the intended slaughter (וַיִּנָּחֶם . . . עַל־הָרָעָה, 32:14) reaffirms the root נחם. Between the two, Moses rejects the opportunity to become the father of a new chosen people and reminds YHWH instead of his old covenant with the patriarchs. This loyalty to the nation gathers additional force when we recognize in the choice of words an allusion to the ambiguous naming of Noah, who, at a similar juncture, allowed the world to perish. Indeed, Moses' own name מֹשֶׁה, the one who "draws out," resonates more plangently as a result of the echo.

The formal gloss of Moses' name, which ends the bulrushes episode in Exodus 2, shows a complexity of a rather different order:

וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם מְשִׁיתִהוּ׃

> And she [Pharaoh's daughter] named him Moses, saying, "Because I drew
> him out of the water." (2:10)

One can see how such a tradition could have arisen among hypothetical
tradents centuries after the exodus to explain the strange-sounding name that
had outlived its Egyptian derivation in popular memory. In fact, the name
Moses seems to be the familiar form of a theophoric name, on the pattern, for
instance, of Thutmose ("child of [the god] Thoth").[15] The story of the babe in
the bulrushes, a version of the familiar *Märchenmotif* of the exposed child and
similar in many ways to the Babylonian legend of Sargon of Akkad, might then
have been elaborated to introduce the name etymology. Closer analysis sug-
gests, however, that this sequence is improbable; for the genocide tradition
which serves to explain the exposure of the infant Moses is already the essential
basis for the whole of chap. 1, and the narrative itself lacks any synonymic or
paronomastic echo of the etymological elements ("draw," "water").[16]

The outlook is more promising if we start from the premise that the name
gloss was a complex literary invention, or that the redactors appropriated avail-
able traditions for sophisticated ends. Their point of departure was typically the
individual word in its patterns of repetition and variation, which lends itself less
obtrusively than the sentence or story unit to the inscription of covert meaning.
In the account of Moses' birth, our attention is drawn immediately to the per-
sistent יֶלֶד ("child"), which occurs eight times in as many lines between v. 3 and
the naming in v. 10. Since "child" (*mesu* in Egyptian) is at the root of Moses'
name, we begin with a double etymology, one public, one disguised, just as
Moses at the beginning of Exodus has a double identity, Egyptian and Hebrew.[17]

[15] See J. G. Griffiths, "The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses," *JNES* 12 (1953) 225–31;
W. F. Albright, "Moses in Historical and Theological Perspective," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty
Acts of God* (ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller, Jr.; Garden City,
NY: Doubleday, 1976) 120–31; Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia: West-
minster, 1978) 329; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New
York: Schocken, 1986) 32–33. An earlier version of the same argument by J. H. Breasted was the
basis for Freud's reconstruction in *Moses and Monotheism*. An Egyptian etymology (via *mos*,
"water") was suggested as early as Josephus, *Ant.* 2.9.6, and Philo, *Vita Mosis* 1.17. A variety of
alternative explanations, ancient and modern, are listed in KB. For occurrences of the name
"Mose" in Egyptian documents, see A. H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: Clarendon,
1961) 277.

[16] See Brevard Childs, "The Birth of Moses," and *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological
Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 12, 19; and Long, *Problem,* 58.

[17] I assume that some knowledge of Egyptian culture, extending to the rudiments of nomen-
clature, was common among the literary elite well before the postexilic date proposed by D. B.
Redford for the "insertion" of the tradition regarding Pithom and Raamses ("Exodus I 11," *VT* 13
[1963] 401–18). Corroborative evidence would include the play on the divine name Ra in Exod
10:10 (cf. 5:19; 32:12), noted by Cassuto in the wake of Rashi and the midrash; see G. A. Rends-
burg, "Bilingual Wordplay in the Bible," *VT* 38 (1988) 354–57. Siegfried Morenz has gone so far as

Disguise and the doubling of identities are prominent features of the succeeding episodes. In the first, Moses slays an Egyptian who has attacked a nameless Hebrew, "one of his people," for whom he feels a sudden sympathy. Their struggle suggests the internal conflict of identities, which will only be resolved, or transformed, through divine election. It thus foreshadows the struggle on the road back from Midian (4:24–26), where Moses, himself this time the victim of an attack by YHWH, reenacts both the covenant of circumcision and the agon of Jacob, thereby exorcising the Egyptian within and acceding to his complex role as the nation's savior. As the young homicide, however, his heritage is still uncertain, whence his furtive efforts to conceal the Egyptian corpse and to intercede between the two struggling Hebrews (2:11–15). The latter episode, which accentuates the ambiguity of his position, anticipates the selfless intercession for the people at Sinai, where once more it is YHWH who must initiate the fulfillment. Before his still-unacknowledged countrymen, however, his presumption invites misapprehension: "Who made you a prince and a judge over us?" one asks when reproached. "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (2:14). Such questions, raised again by the murmurings of Israel in the wilderness, will gain in resonance in the course of Exodus and Numbers. Yet there is no indication at this point that Moses hears anything more than the immediate threat, it being integral to this stage of the redemption history that his acts should have a meaning independent of any willed or knowing compliance, much as his name bears a meaning not evinced in its explicit gloss.

The episode by the well in Midian, where Moses defends Zipporah and her sisters and waters their flock, likewise recalls a scene from the Jacob story, suggesting again that Moses, although still an "Egyptian" in the eyes of Jethro's daughters, is conforming himself to the typological pattern of the patriarchs (2:16–21; cf. Genesis 29). The verb used at this point, דלה ("to draw") is unusual, however, and the author seems to have gone to some trouble to work it in.[18] He does so twice: first, somewhat redundantly, with reference to the daughters who "came and drew water (וַתִּדְלֶנָה) and filled the troughs to water their father's flock" (2:16); the second time, emphatically doubled, with reference to Moses: "An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and even drew water for us (וְגַם־דָּלֹה דָלָה לָנוּ) and watered the flock" (2:19). As the act of drawing water signals the imminent resolution of the conflict in Moses' identity by affiliating him with the patriarchal history, so the word דלה points to a similar reordering at the level of the cloven name, relating semantically to the verb משה used in the overt gloss by Pharaoh's daughter, and formally (by meta-

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to suggest that the persistent appeal to name etymology in the Bible was partly owing to its prominence in Egyptian literature ("Wortspiele in Ägypten," in *Festschrift Johannes Jahn* [Leipzig: Seemann, 1958] 23–32).

[18]The word occurs only twice elsewhere (Ps 30:2; Prov 20:5; cf. Prov 26:7), both times in late passages and with a figurative meaning.

thetic paronomasia: דל–/–דלר) to the cryptic etymon ילד prominent in the pre-
ceding narrative.[19] Egyptian and Hebrew begin to draw together in this draw-
ing from the well, where the public and the disguised, the outer and the inner,
the early and the late are partially reconciled.

According to the logic of the story, Moses' name is linked to the passive
form of the verb משה (he is "the one drawn out"). Philologically, however, the
name itself suggests the active participle ("the drawer out"). This second ety-
mological doubling (passive-active) offers new opportunities for interpretation.
One might say that the "false" etymologization broadcast by Pharaoh's daugh-
ter, which presents Moses as the passive object of a foreigner's sympathy, corre-
sponds to his "false" upbringing as a Gentile, alienated from YHWH and his
people, while the eventual adumbration of an active form implies the assertion
of his true identity. I prefer, however, to take the doubling as marking a con-
stant tension in our view of Moses: actively "drawing out" in relation to his
people, "the one drawn out" in relation to YHWH. .

Interpreted this way, the question posed by Moses' name is the central
question of the exodus itself, which touches both on the nature of mediation or
agency, and on the relation of final and proximate cause in the deliverance of
Israel. To appreciate this fully, we must shift our attention from the ambiguous
stem משה to a final synonym, the verb הוציא ("to bring out," sometimes "to draw
out," as the hand from the bosom or water from a rock). As the word that stands
most often between YHWH and Israel, its various forms might almost be taken
as linguistic insignia of the mediator himself, whose proper name they reconfig-
ure in a broader historical context. That YHWH "brought you out of Egypt" is
arguably the central creed of Israelite religion. It is the basis for the institution
of the Passover (Exodus 12–13), the blessings of Balaam (Num 23:22; 24:8), the
Holiness Code (Lev 19:36; 26:45; etc.), and even the Decalogue (Exod 20:2).
Yet in the first instance הוציא is used not of YHWH but of Moses, who is told by
the divine voice speaking from the burning bush to go to Pharaoh "that you may
bring out my people, the sons of Israel, from Egypt" (Exod 3:10). Here and
almost to the end of the wilderness narratives, Moses guards himself against
assuming this active role too directly. But the temptation to do so, to go beyond
the liminal status of mediator, of passive-active agent, constitutes one of the
text's principal themes, which we are apt to miss if we have not fully assimilated
the doubling of identity first revealed in the bulrushes episode.

Resonances that depend on our carefully registering the subjective posi-
tion of the verb הוציא inform the story of Israel's murmuring at the Red Sea,
where Moses tacitly corrects the rebels who credit him (not YHWH) with
"bringing them out" (Exod 14:11–14), and the episode of the golden calf, where
Moses declines YHWH's own offer of personal salvation (tendered in words

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[19] The correspondence could be extended to all three elements, assuming a memory of the
historical form of the verb, which was originally ילד. On the evolution of III-*he* verbs from the orig-
inal III-*yod* form, see GKC, ¶75.

that echo Aaron's idolatrous offer to the people! "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up [הֶעֱלוּךָ] out of the land of Egypt," Exod 32:4, 8) and returns the credit for the "bringing out" where it belongs: "Why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom *thou* hast brought forth [הוֹצֵאתָ] out of the land of Egypt" (32:11). More subtly, the tension enlarges our understanding of the first sign that follows Moses' call, where it is emphatically YHWH who afflicts and then heals the hand that Moses "draws out" or "brings forth" from his bosom (Exod 4:6–7). Finally, it helps clarify the enigmatic transgression at Meribah (Num 20:2–13), an episode symmetrical in many respects with the birth story, where Moses is excluded from the promised land less for some supposed character flaw (impatience, anger—as if this were a moral apologue) than for at last presuming, by the merest linguistic slip, to claim responsibility for the "exodus": "And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels; shall *we* bring forth (נוֹצִיא) water for you out of this rock?'" (Num 20:10). A seemingly innocuous word here signals by allusion a fundamental offense against the principle of human dependency. Betrayed by his own etymological history, Moses will be buried and left behind in Midian for profanely referring to himself and Aaron as the ones who "bring forth" or "draw out."[20]

The commissioning at Horeb stands at the other extreme from this story. It announces the beginning of YHWH's "drawing out" of Moses. Moses' doubtful response, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring (אוֹצִיא) the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exod 3:11), marks a turning point for the uncertainties of identity adumbrated in the early episodes and inaugurates the uncertainties of agency that will come to take their place. An Egyptian by adoption, an Israelite by birth, the *yeled/mesu* will also be the first of the prophets. In the eyes of subsequent generations, unable to perceive him steadily enough to bring his features into focus, he indeed seems to stand midway between YHWH and Israel—a powerfully indeterminate figure with a cannily overdetermined name.

In his essay *Poésie et pensée abstraite*, Paul Valéry observed that it is only the speed with which we pass over words that allows us to understand them at all. Pause long enough upon even the simplest word (consider its etymology, for instance) and "it changes into an enigma, an abyss, a torment to thought."[21] The names in the biblical narratives force us, with their disjunctive glosses, to enter this abyss; they generate what Kenneth Burke would have called "perspective by incongruity," but raised to a higher power. In the double etymologies, two distinct metonymies, each in itself incongruous, are juxtaposed to create a

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[20] See Jacob Milgrom, "Magic, Monotheism, and the Sin of Moses," in *The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Essays in Honor of G. E. Mendenhall* (ed. H. B. Huffmon et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 251–61.

[21] Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres* (ed. Jean Hytier; 2 vols.; Pléiade; Paris: Gallimard, 1957) 1. 1317.

heightened enigma, a ghostly space potent in its indeterminacy. This philologi-
cal perspective, opened up by competing senses, is enlarged, in the multi-
layered text that we now know, by the doubling and disjunction of narrative
episodes. The effect of a simple gloss is generally different. Nominal motiva-
tions, of which the etiology is the most extreme, initially serve to bind the
proper noun back onto the linguistic field, so that even if the etiology depends
on a contingent and unique event, some kind of necessity is introduced. The
point of the typical biblical strategy of conflicting or ironic motivations is to
undo once again this usurpation of existential distinctness by a linguistic sys-
tem—or by any of the other codes or determinisms (theological or historical
causality for instance) which it represents.

To the literary critic, as opposed to the philosopher of language, name and
etymology figure positions in the structure of all interpretation, in the relation
of text to commentary. Every etymology works like the reader's own thoughts to
supplement the "primary text," but in such a way as to make manifest the mean-
ing behind the text, the meaning latent in its genesis, motivating its displace-
ments. In a verisimilar narrative, naming establishes and fixes identity as
something tautologically itself; etymology, by returning it to the trials of lan-
guage, compromises it, complicates it, renders it potentially mobile. Etymology
from this perspective is congruent with the whole ethos of biblical iconoclasm:
what the name buries or empedestals, the etymology animates or exhumes.

The limitations of a tradition-historical reading of biblical names are
nowhere more evident than in the story of Jacob's wrestling at the ford, where
the change of name from Jacob to Israel has been taken as reflecting a shift in
the loyalties of an actual nomadic group, forerunners of the Israelites, who
renounced their ancestral deity following their migration to Canaan in favor of
the indigenous god El.[22] This kind of pseudo-scholarly hypothesis, which owes
more to Hegel's theory of spiritual evolution than to the biblical text, ignores
the astonishing network of internal doublings and intertextual echoes—the lit-
erary explorations of twinning and projection, identity and difference—which
the renaming helps to anchor. Can it be a coincidence that Jacob's two names
figure in a story that features two camps, two crossings, two embassies, two

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[22] Otto Eissfeldt, "Renaming in the OT," in *Words and Meanings: Essays presented to David
Winton Thomas* (ed. Peter R. Ackroyd and Barnabas Lindars; Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1968) 69–79. Eissfeldt expressly disregards both the narrative context and the explanatory
glosses, which "are of a fictional, narrative kind and have no historical content" (p. 76 n. 2). At the
opposite end of the critical spectrum, the Jabbok story has been a popular target for literary critics,
including Roland Barthes, "La lutte avec l'ange," in *Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique: Essais
d'interprétation* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1971) 27–39; Harold Bloom, "Wrestling Sig-
mund: Three Paradigms for Poetic Originality," in *The Breaking of the Vessels* (Chicago: University
of Chicago Press, 1982) 42–70; Geoffrey H. Hartman, "The Struggle for the Text," in *Midrash and
Literature* (ed. Hartman and Sanford Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 3–18; and,
most provocatively, Brisman, *Voice of Jacob,* 84–92. Of the many searching interpretations by bibli-
cal scholars, Stephen A. Geller's still seems the most comprehensive ("The Struggle at the Jabbok:
The Uses of Enigma in a Biblical Narrative," *JANES* 14 [1982] 37–60).

wives, two maids, two night lodgings; two kinds of "blessing," "deliverance," and "sending/release" [שׁלח]; two kinds of threatening אִישׁ? Or that key words and themes recur in analogous combinations in the David story and the Sinai theophany (Exodus 33)? Such doublings, the narrative equivalent of biblical parallelism, constitute the two tablets of all biblical narrative, but they are most densely clustered precisely here in the Jabbok episode, perhaps in illustration of the endless recession to which conceptual twinning or reflection opens the door.

In its final form at least, the story culminates in a double etymological gloss; for the etiology of "Israel"—the obvious ideological focus of the story—is closely shadowed by the etiology of the place-name Peniel or Penuel.[23] Jacob, having sustained the night-long contest, has just exacted his opponent's blessing:

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים
וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוּכָל: וַיִּשְׁאַל יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּידָה־נָּא שְׁמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶּה
תִּשְׁאַל לִשְׁמִי וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתוֹ שָׁם: וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנִיאֵל כִּי־רָאִיתִי
אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים וַתִּנָּצֵל נַפְשִׁי: וַיִּזְרַח־לוֹ הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָבַר אֶת פְּנוּאֵל
וְהוּא צֹלֵעַ עַל־יְרֵכוֹ:

> Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me now your name." But he said, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he crossed over Penuel limping on his thigh. (Gen 32:29–32)

From a critical perspective, the etymology of Peniel is the more arresting of the two glosses; for it preempts what seems to have been an original etiology of Jabbok, prepared in the story by the key word אבק ("wrestle," vv. 25, 26).[24] As *ya'ăqōb* is changed by the angel to *yiśrā'ēl*, so *yabboq* is changed by Jacob to *pĕnî'ēl*. On the surface, both turns seem to move in the direction of sacralization: the outlaw Jacob is "blessed" and the scene of that blessing is consecrated as its memorial; Jacob's "deceit" is redeemed by Israel's "struggle" or "persis-

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[23] The juxtaposition of the two spellings in succeeding verses has contributed to the view that the etiology is an interpolation. Penuel would be the old name as it appears elsewhere (Judg 8:8, 9, 17; 1 Kgs 12:25); Peniel, though perhaps coined to facilitate the proposed etymology, corresponds to a form found in proper nouns emphasizing relationship. A similar inconsistency occurs with the toponym Helam/Heleam for the place where Hadadezer and David muster their armies (2 Sam 10:16–17). As in Genesis 32, the second mention seems to give the original spelling (חלאמה); the first (חילם) may reflect a play on the word "armies" (חילים) (see Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 126). For the morphology of Penuel/Peniel, see GKC ¶90a, k; and R. Meyer, "Probleme der hebräischen Grammatik," *ZAW* 63 (1951) 221–35.

[24] For the critical arguments, see the bibliography and summary in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–26: A Commentary* (BK 1982; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 512–13, 519.

tence," Jabboq's "emptiness" (בָּקָק) transfigured by Peniel's "presence" (פָּנִים).
The glosses themselves, however, and especially the relation between them,
invite a more complex reading. The formulaic explanation of the place-name
begins by compounding the basic renaming: the construct or genitive "face of
El"—a hieratic cult name—being leveled or "supplanted" by the more radical
"face to face" (פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים), which the narrative itself has generated. This
explicit motivation of Peniel is rivaled in turn by yet another duplication; for the
two "faces" reflect those of the estranged twins, Jacob and Esau, already lurking
under cover of the Hebrew idioms. Still afraid of his brother's resentment after
twenty years, Jacob prudently (slyly? timorously?) sends his gifts in advance;
"for he thought, 'I may appease him [literally, "cover his face," אֲכַפְּרָה פָנָיו] with
the present that goes before me [to my face, לְפָנָיו], and afterwards I shall see
his face; perhaps he will accept me [lift up my face]'" (32:21). This "cover
up/atonement" will have to be mediated before the two brothers finally meet
and Jacob begs Esau to accept his present: "for truly to see your face is like see-
ing the face of God, with such favor have you received me" (33:10).

One should note too that "Peniel" carries punning connotations of anteri-
ority or precedence, prominently featured in the preliminary saga material (vv.
4, 17, 18). Not only are the servants to pass on "before" (לִפְנֵי, "to the face of")
Jacob and Esau, but they are to drive their flocks on "before" them. As the
flocks to the message that follows, so the messengers themselves to the brother
who comes "after" (אַחֲרֵי, vv. 19–21, 4 times), reminding the reader that the ini-
tial cause of the trouble was Jacob's double theft of birthright and blessing, his
double abrogation of priority, interpreted by sluggish Esau on the principle of
nomen-omen: "Is he not rightly named Jacob (יַעֲקֹב)? For he has supplanted me
(וַיַּעְקְבֵנִי) these two times" (27:36).

Such correspondences are like stretti in a longer fugue, in which repeti-
tions and etymologies counterpoint the basic doublings of brother and brother,
man and God. The theme is set by the independent tradition which in the
Christian Bible stands at the head of the chapter:[25]

[25] This prelude is best read in conjunction with the Janus-like transitional verse that precedes
it: "And Laban arose early in the morning and kissed his sons and his daughters and blessed them;
and Laban departed and returned to his place" (Gen 32:1 or 31:55). As the angels recall the the-
ophany and divine promise at Bethel (28:10–20), so Laban's departure recalls the "kiss" and "bless-
ing" bestowed by Isaac not on his two sons but on smooth Jacob alone (27:27). They will be recalled
again following the wrestling, when a vindicated Jacob receives the overdetermined "kiss" of Esau
and bids him accept the gift which he idiomatically calls "my blessing" (בִּרְכָתִי, 33:11). (This report
echoes in turn the report of the kiss Laban runs to give Jacob when he first arrives in Paddan-Aram
[29:13], although it opposes Laban's calculating eagerness by having Esau weep in imitation of the
antithetical kiss with which Jacob greets Rachel in the same episode [29:11]). Having "blessed" his
sons and his daughters, Laban returns to "his place" (לִמְקֹמוֹ). The place toward which Jacob turns
his steps, after he is pointedly omitted from Laban's blessing, is one whose identity and name still
have to be fought for.

וְיַעֲקֹב הָלַךְ לְדַרְכּוֹ וַיִּפְגְּעוּ־בוֹ מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים: וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב כַּאֲשֶׁר רָאָם
מַחֲנֵה אֱלֹהִים זֶה וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא מַחֲנָיִם:

> Jacob went on his way and angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them
> he said, "This is God's camp." So he called the name of that place Mahanaim.
> (32:2–3)

Jacob sees a single host or "camp" of angels (the Septuagint has simply "gods"
or divine beings—one possible interpretation of the etiology of Israel); the
name of the site, however, is in the dual case: Mahanaim (*"two camps"*). In view
of the context, we are probably meant to understand the duplication as apply-
ing to the opposition of the angels' camp and Jacob's. The primary doubling of
divine and human is then mirrored in the semantic shift from "angels" to "mes-
sengers" (both מַלְאָכִים), and in the "encounter" of Jacob's forces and Esau's in
chap. 33.[26] However, Jacob's subsequent division of his own followers into two
camps (מַחֲנוֹת, vv. 8, 11) keeps active the other possible interpretation of the
dual—that of a division within the divine host itself—casting its typological
shadow across the sudden apparition later that night of the spectral opponent.

As the rabbis observed, Jacob appears to pass twice over the Jabbok (vv.
23–24): "He had forgotten some small jars and he returned for them"! (*b.
Ḥullin* 91a, cited by Rashi). This double "crossing" (עבר) of the Jabbok (mimet-
ically, a last strategem for evading the wrath of Esau) will be resolved by the
heroic "crossing" of Peniel at dawn (v. 32), one of the hints that we are to associ-
ate the two toponyms, and by the complementary "crossing" to greet Esau
(33:3), where in contrast to the envoy scene it is Jacob who passes over "before"
his family. At this point, however, Jacob is like the too busy knight of *Fear and
Trembling*, who as he is about to leap into eternity discovers he has forgotten
something and goes home to fetch it. An Abraham would have journeyed on;
Jacob, whose faith is less tractable, more errantly familiar, returns to the scene
of the double camp. Deferring for a moment the invitation to consider the
opponent as Jacob's double (the emphasis on his solitude and the stark
anonymity of the second figure appearing out of nowhere seem to anticipate
the conventions of dream vision or psychomachia), the initial interpretative
contest pits the אִישׁ as a projection of Jacob's fear—a personification of Esau's
four hundred "men"—against the אִישׁ as representative of the angelic hosts.[27]

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[26] The semantic shift from "angels" to "messengers" is matched by a phonetic shift from פגע
(for Jacob's "encounter" with the numina—already an echo of the complementary "encounter" at
the מָקוֹם in Bethel [28:11]) to פגש (for Esau's "encounters" with his brother's emissaries [32:18;
33:8]). The repercussive chain extends as far as the account of Moses' return from Midian, in which
the reunion of younger with older brother is likewise preceded by a nighttime "encounter" with a
threatening numen—an analogy underlined by the repetition of פגש for both divine and human
(Exod 4:24, 27).

[27] Traditional Jewish commentary identified the אִישׁ as the guardian of Esau, the archangel
Michael, the kabbalistic Metatron, or even an angel named Israel, compelled by Jacob to relinquish
his name; Christian commentators had recourse to the Holy Spirit (see Louis Ginzberg, *The Leg-*

The ironies emerge more clearly if we contrast the strict hierarchies of primary epic, where the daylight battles of gods and men are depicted with consequential decorum and logic. In the *Iliad*, for instance, dissension in the Greek camp is followed directly by dissension in the heavenly council, but the distance between the two orders is never put in question, and there is no threat of contamination or risk of extinction to either. In the Jacob story, the orders and perspectives are skewed: on one axis, we are given a suspended conflict between two brothers; on the other, the maneuvers, tutelary or menacing, of the heavenly host; at their intersection, the solitary combat with an unidentified stranger.

At the moment of intensest effort, neither side is identifiable. Just as the identities of older and younger brother are confused by the saga of transumption and usurpation, so Jacob and his opponent in the "emptiness" by the Jabbok are for a while indistinguishable. This confrontation and fusion underscored by the verbal alignment that inaugurates the struggle: "And Jacob (יַעֲקֹב) was left alone and a man wrestled (וַיֵּאָבֵק) with him" (v. 25), where the verb, which occurs nowhere else in the Bible, not only continues the phonetic twinning with יַעֲקֹב and יַבֹּק (v. 23), but—allowing for the conflation of the two gutturals *(aleph* and *ayin)*—absorbs the elements of Jacob's own name. Modern English translations tend to chasten the actual fight, adding the name Jacob like a kind of nominal fig leaf where the Hebrew grammar goes bare: "And when he [RSV: the man] saw that he could not prevail against him [RSV: Jacob], he touched the hollow of his thigh" (v. 26). The Hebrew pronouns are less specific in their reference, so that we may wonder whether the wily Jacob is not rather the aggressor—a possibility enforced by the stranger's cry for quarter in the following verse. To touch the thigh is to threaten the potency of the opponent, to reach for the source of generative power; and Jacob's name, we are frequently reminded, means "supplanter." Yet the struggle does not lead to a vindication of Jacob's name, but to a renaming.[28]

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ends of the Jews [7 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–38] 5. 305–6). Modern scholars, by contrast, have detected signs of a mythical substratum, in which the opponent would have been a river numen or boundary guard, and Jacob a kind of Semitic Billygoat Gruff.

[28]Offspring "come forth from the thigh" (Gen 46:26; Exod 1:5; cf. Gen 24:2, 9; 47:29; Num 5:21–22). The idea that "thigh" is a euphemism for *membrum virile* was proposed already by Ibn Ezra (see Geller, "Struggle at the Jabbok," 50). "And Jacob's thigh was put out of joint" (32:26b), a clause that deflects the impious reading, may be another sign of the extreme reflexivity that runs through the entire episode, or an interpolation, added to motivate the appended prohibition against eating the "thigh sinew" (גִּיד הַנָּשֶׁה): "Therefore the children of Israel do not eat the sinew which is upon the hollow of the thigh unto this day, because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh on the sinew" (32:33). A fuller discussion of chap. 32 would have to account for the place of this prohibition (not mentioned among the dietary restrictions of Leviticus 11 or Deut 14:3–21), which, containing the first occurrence in the Bible of the group patronymic "children of Israel," deserves a closer reading than it usually receives. Allowing that גִּיד הַנָּשֶׁה, no less than "hollow of the thigh," points figuratively to the seat of generation—more specifically to the "root" or "source" of the generations ("Why is it called גִּיד הַנָּשֶׁה? Because it moved [נָשָׁה] from its place and rose up" [*b. Ḥullin*

The climactic movement begins with Jacob first acknowledging his old name in a deceptively simple exchange: "And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob'" (v. 28). Insofar as "Jacob" metaphorically is the "deceiver," his response may appear cannily unreadable (like the paradox of the Cretan insisting all Cretans are liars), but it has the virtue of repealing the flatly dishonest response to blind Isaac's similar question earlier in the cycle ("'Who are you, my son?' . . . 'I am Esau,'" 27:18–19)—a deception that showed him to be "rightly named Jacob" (v. 36). Structurally, the bestowal of the new name Israel "repairs" the symmetry that has been upset since the opening episodes, where the older brother already bears two names, each with its etiology (25:25, 30)—as the redundant apposition of Seir and Edom in 32:4 serves to recall— while Jacob, despite the detail of the intrauterine struggle, receives only one. In contrast to the stable duplex Esau–Edom, the eponym "Israel" is presented as superseding the birth-name "Jacob," with which it is thus somehow at "strife," even as its declared "prevalence" reconfirms paradoxically the persistence of the displaced "supplanter." What is striking in all this is the way the names seem to reproduce via the delicately animated shifts of language the very mechanisms of projection and self-reflection which we observed within the wrestling narrative, as if the problem of twinning had extended its domain to the relation of word and act. שׂרה, the proposed etymon of Israel, is commonly translated "strive," but in fact we have no biblical evidence for determining its meaning aside from that offered by the story itself, which, with its parallel in Hosea 12, marks the only occurrence of the verb (a circularity that affects the Jacobic synonym אבק as well).[29] Philologically, the reader is left darkling, obliged to assume this *sui generis* meaning on a kind of narrative faith. The interpretative ground-

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91a; Rashi; cf. Gevirtz, "Of Patriarchs and Puns," 52–53])—the verse seems to offer a metacritical reflection on the very etymological reasoning that informs the story (whence perhaps its chiastic or self-reflective structure). What the children of Israel are forbidden to consume is the root or source of their own life, and just as the source of the people must be proscribed if its life is to be "preserved" (v. 31), so language must proscribe or repress its etyma or original meanings if it is to maintain its vitality in the present. Put otherwise, for the people to continue as the "children of Israel," their moment of origin—here represented, in contrast to Abraham's call, as an act of violence— must be remembered but not repeated. Ceremonial proscription is just such a memorialization, constituting identity retrospectively, while guarding against traumatic repetition. By punctuating the episode with the arbitrary etiology, the text moves beyond epistemological ambiguity to something more definitive. If, in the continual struggle for meaning, Jacob is literature's voice against the truths of theology, then the final etiology is history's voice against literature. In its simulation of linear cause and effect, it suggests that these are not just stories, but stories that are real— that explain for us the world as it has come to be.

   [29]LXX, Vulgate, and Pesh. assume the root שׂרר ("be strong"); Aquila, Sym., and the Targum, שׂרר ("rule"), the gloss favored by Geller ("Struggle at the Jabbok," 53, 54 n. 50), who in the wake of rabbinic exegesis hears a play on the title שׂר ("prince," applied to the heavenly hosts in Josh 5:14 and Ps 82:7). An alternative translation, "persist," is supported by the Arabic cognate (BDB, 975a; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* [Westminster Commentaries; London: Methuen, 1904]). See further R. B. Coote, "The Meaning of the Name Israel," *HTR* 65 (1972) 137–46.

ing promised by the etymology turns out, like the gift of the name, to be para-
doxically contingent on the narrative it would interpret.

Assuming the conventional understanding of the verb, the most plausible
etymology for the name "Israel" would have been "El strives [for you]"—a cele-
bration of God's special protection in extension of the traditional "I am with
you" motif, already introduced in YHWH's promise to Jacob at Bethel (28:15).
The story of the wrestling undermines this pious fiction, replacing the divine
warrior, guardian of Israel, with the dangerous adversary: "El strives [against
you]." The shift from patronage to enmity is prepared by the narrative; the gloss
itself extends the movement, confounding attacker and victim by dislocating
the nominal markers: "your name shall be called El-strives, for *you* have striven
with El and with man." To strive with El entails a turn from piety to self-
reliance, hence also a striving "with man" or "the man"; but the unexpected
inversion of subject and object invites us to reconfigure the identity of the two
contenders. Like our view of the solitary victor himself bearing the losses of the
battle, the reflexive turn in the name formula figures a dynamic intimacy, a
coinherence of self and other, man and God, grounded in mutual resistance.
The reciprocal movement recalls the oscillation between external confronta-
tion and internal division first staged at Mahanaim and provokes a complemen-
tary reading of the contest in which the stranger is not only Jacob's twin but his
own phantasmic projection, who confers his gift of otherness—the blessing of
change, of becoming—and is then abandoned. The mythical agon is from this
perspective a parable of self-begetting. The new name testifies that Jacob has
avoided the melancholic deadlock of being merely Jacob: by grappling the
phantom of invulnerable selfhood, the victor empowers it as agent of his own
alteration.

The sign of this transformation is Jacob's own act of renaming, which car-
ries the dramatic agon into the poetic arena. If the first gloss, the word of the
angel, turns El against his chosen servant and makes their struggle the source of
the nation "Israel," the second gloss, the word of Jacob still struggling against
the priority of his opponent, trumps the first by turning presence against itself:
פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים. At Sinai, "presence" (פָּנִים) is the forbidden face of YHWH, the
one revelation withheld even from Moses by the God who proclaims his name
(Exod 33:17–23). The Sinai theophany is related verbally to the Jabbok story via
multiple echoes: the play on the implications of "before" and "behind"; the
prominence of the verb עבר ("pass by" or "cross over") linked to "the place"
(הַמָּקוֹם); the appropriation of God's "face," which Moses is denied ("you cannot
see my face" [לֹא תוּכַל]), but which Jacob, who has "prevailed" (וַתּוּכָל), claims to
have seen; and finally the emphasis on the divine name, name changing, and
"knowing by name," which together form the arena in which the struggle for
"face" or "priority" is finally staged. Covered by the hollow of the divine hand
(כַּפִּי), Moses will know only God's "behind" (אֲחֹרָי), the aftereffect of his pas-
sage "before" him (עַל־פָּנֶיךָ). The extraordinary audacity of Jacob, who "covers

the face" of his brother and strikes the hollow of his opponent's thigh (כַּף־יְרֵכוֹ),
is to dispose of this forbidden face—the *pĕnê-ʾel*— not waiting for the name
which the angel conveys, but seizing its most sacred and paradoxical expression
and making it a memorial to his own success. At Jabbok, the hidden name is
proclaimed, but it is proclaimed in the voice of Jacob. The text thus enacts at
the literary level a version of the struggle it represents at the level of story.
Divine presence and name, for the biblical writer, can never be manifest in and
of themselves, but only by virtue of literature's resistance to them, as the poetic
possibilities latent in the names of men.

In a strange way, the angel appears to admit as much. The question he
poses in response to Jacob's is usually taken to mean that the name is holy or
forbidden—the meaning implied (with a different set of ironies) in the story of
Samson's birth: "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful? (וְהוּא־פֶלִאי)"
(Judg 13:18). But the response of Manoah and his nameless wife at Mahaneh-
dan ("camp of judgment") will be to fall on their face (13:20); the response of
Jacob at the "twin camps" of Mahanaim is an act of celebratory defiance—a
return in kind of the angel's own act of blessing and nominal dispensation.
Accordingly, the angel's equivocal question, put to Jacob, seems rather to have
the sense, "Why do you ask, seeing I've just told you?" (just named you Israel);
or even, "Why do you ask *me*, seeing it's what you will?" In the end, it is Jacob's
show of poetic or transformational power that brings on the dawn. The best
gloss is Whitman's Orphic expansion in *Song of Myself:* "Dazzling and tremen-
dous how quick the sun-rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send
sun-rise out of me." Jacob's naming of Peniel is his poetic sunrise, his response
to the challenge of a creativity preceding his—perhaps to the fact of language
itself, which, as the condition and ground of all literary creation, has a quasi-
divine status which literature must contest. God created things by naming
them; art and criticism recreate them by undoing their names and imposing
new ones. Etymology in the Bible can thus be seen as the Jacobic response,
ascendant and foundational, to the priority of the medium. In its deployment of
duplicities and equivocations, it figures the struggle of verbal art against the
sacralizations of being.

The sun that rises over Penuel, however, brings its more public clarifica-
tions. With the return of the contestants to their respective spheres, the way is
opened for the consequent reordering of the social and the familial in chap. 33.
Jacob, lifting up his eyes, beholds not the camp of warrior angels but Esau and
his four hundred men. As the double camp (מחנה) had yielded to the succession
of gifts (מנחה), so now the wrestling (אבק) with the stranger becomes, for all
Jacob's anxiety, the brother's embrace (חבק, 33:4). Even Jacob's wounded figure
as he passes the ford "limping" (צלע) casts as it were a brighter shadow; for with
the return of context its sound-shape echoes the sound of "preservation" in the
previous verse: "So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, 'For I
have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved (וַתִּנָצֵל)'" (32:31). This

diminished echo of Jacob's prayer that YHWH "preserve" him from his brother's hand (הַצִּילֵנִי, v. 12) seems as significant for our understanding as the featured gloss of the name itself. Whether such diffused resonance intends a more general sacralization of the entire structure of language—or only a radical leveling, a demotion of all special centers of attention—is the kind of question the text poses repeatedly. But it also guards us from answering it with every literary resource available, down to the most "insignificant" etymology. Like the matching of triumph and loss commemorated in Jacob's crooked gait—a crookedness that contrasts with the straight ladder of revelation as reality contrasts with dream, fulfillment with promise, the journey back with the journey out—this contest of pun and etymology, of phonetic coincidence and semantic entailment, reverberates across an "emptiness" our criticism cannot fill.[30]

[30]A version of this paper was presented under the title "The Double Cave" at The English Institute, Harvard University, in September 1984. I am grateful to Geoffrey Hartman for inviting the original paper, and to James Ackerman, Robert Alter, Michael Fishbane, Bernard Levinson, and Meir Sternberg for urging me to publish it a decade later in a version true to its initial, exploratory form. Colleagues and friends at the University of Hamburg responded generously to the revision. A fuller treatment, directed at the literary problems here raised in passing, will appear in my forthcoming *The Language of Adam* (Harvard University Press).